

Breaking Through to Familiar Ground

by Frank James Fisher



Detail of “High Protein Drink,” slab-built porcelain, raku fired, 2005. “My graphic series is a culmination of my advertising experience. I have a professional eye for graphics and a love for ceramics. This marriage of two-dimensional graphic design applied to three-dimensional design is the heart and soul of my art. The artwork takes the advertising and communication images of American culture and applies them to anything and everything. Newspapers, advertisements, packaging, promotional flyers, logos, photos all become elements of design,” says Fisher.

It is not easy to be an artist. It is enjoyable and gratifying, but definitely not easy. That’s why success tastes so sweet when we reach our goals. Goals in this instance are artistic accomplishments or milestones; a point of departure that signals something creative and new has developed.

Developing your artistic voice can be a complicated journey. We all have our favorite artists. We admire their work and dream of creating works of that caliber. Our first period of creative development is spent imitating

artistic heroes. We become disciples of their style. Then, a crucial moment arrives and we begin to break from our hero’s influence to explore new ground of our own. Sometimes, we embrace yet another artist and follow in his or her footsteps.

This was my plight; many years of imitating the voices of other artists. And I knew it too. I had sidetracked my artistic evolution by looking to the art of others to find myself.

My difficulty began when I poured my best creative energy into my day job as a creative director in Detroit’s

"War," 11 inches in height, slab-built porcelain, raku fired, with cord, 2006.
"To create these [graphic] works, I have accumulated a library of discarded printing plates to mark the clay with impressions," states Fisher.





"Some Tea and the Latest News," 7½ inches in height, thrown and slab-built porcelain, raku fired, 2004.

advertising community. By evening, my creativity was too exhausted to develop a personal artistic expression of my own. There is little common ground between advertising and fine art. In art school, my generation was reminded that commercial artists were not real artists. As an aspiring fine artist, this meant my forty hours a week of creative experiences needed to be abandoned. In fact, to be a real artist, I needed to erase those influences and move 180° in the opposite direction, wher-

ever that might be. That became the puzzle. I needed to deny myself to be myself.

Every craft has a set of guidelines to assist with your creative approach. In advertising, your guidelines involve white space, headlines, tag lines, body text, logos, key graphics and spot colors to name a few. These are the tools of the trade. At work I immersed myself in these tools until I owned them. I knew every variation they could produce. Imagine the frustration of introducing these com-

mercial tools into a natural medium like clay. I couldn't create because my mind was aligned to advertising. For clay, my brain required an entirely different set of aesthetics, a naturally inspired set. How could I explore clay with a headline or squeeze in a strong graphic element with supporting text?

My unoriginal solution was to imitate the style of other ceramics artists. But the works I created were not truly mine. Each was an imitation. The art looked wonderful, but it did not give me a deep personal satisfaction. An artist arrives at their artistic style or voice through personal experience. I had attempted to bypass that experience. I skipped the previous steps the artist experienced, so it was difficult to move forward. It felt like I was writing a novel at the halfway mark, not having read the first half, and not having a clue as to the next page. The sequence of design was gone. It would never be my novel. There is a positive side to this long study period; I became extremely accomplished in a diverse range of methods, styles and mediums. On the negative side, I had not moved any closer to creating my own art.

In 2002, I took the first step in my own direction. I began a series of ceramic teapots that were inspired by a fascination with industrial fixtures and containers. Manufacturing shapes speak with an honest sense of function and purpose. My fascination was the result of researching and photographing manufacturing

facilities for numerous advertising and promotional materials. I created imaginary gas cans by applying my graphic and package design knowledge to the clay. In the true spirit of American marketing, I called them Tea-Cans. Through trial and error, I gravitated to raku firing and evolved a unique glazing process to capture a gritty graphic quality on the clay surface. The result was a purely nostalgic, American vessel.

With the new direction my art had taken, I stopped imitating and began exploring and inventing solutions to concepts I could only visualize. For example, when the clay needed to resemble weathered, thin, galvanized metal, I experimented until that look was accomplished. My thinking moved beyond the clay in terms of the final artwork. The realization took hold that my artwork did not need to be similar to another artists' work to be successful, it only needed to match my vision of art. And my vision revolved around the graphic language of commercial art. This took too many years to realize and embrace. Commercial art could be applied to fine art.

One evening, I watched a television program that featured archaeologists learning about an ancient culture through the study of pottery shards. I tried to imagine modern ceramics as a heightened representation of the current American culture. America is a communication-based country like no other place in the world. Nearly everything we produce is wrapped in logos, slogans



Bottles, to 9½ inches in height, thrown and slab-built porcelain, raku fired, 2004, by Frank James Fisher, Milford, Michigan.

and extravagant graphics. (I should know; I've created my fair share of mass communication in the form of ads, brochures and packaging over the years.) How could I create an American vessel that reflected our modern society? First, the ceramic vessel should become the packaging and container for an imagined product. Second, the surface should speak the mass-produced language of our society. Finally, 200 years from now, the vessel should act like a time capsule. In other words, it should become an abbreviated snapshot of the moment, rather than a complete explanation of the times.

Commercial printing—actually all printing—duplicates a message. I learned the printing side of advertising and marketing through two decades of press checking the print quality on the marketing materials I created. To build a library of images for my graphics, I accumulated used printing plates from print shops. I searched for newspaper plates, advertising plates, packaging plates, small print blocks and even sets of individual lead type. Old or new, I wanted anything that seemed iconic or symbolized deeper issues.

Once transferred onto the porcelain clay surface, the printing plate impressions became the graphic texture for my new line of American products. Some products are common items like beverages or household items, others are impossible products like war. By selecting specific portions from the printing plates, I could edit the content and create a unified theme for each packaging design. For specific phrases or graphics, printer's lead type was set in blocks and impressed into the clay. To "print color," I turned to raku to give impact to the clay packaging. Raku provides a unique graphic quality that brings out a lively spontaneous feel to the surface. By wiping the glazes on and off, the details of the debossed type and graphics are captured. My artwork moves through familiar ground. My advertising aesthetics are being applied to clay to create my art. But is it really art or is it commercial art? Well, even the label commercial art contains the word art. Yes, I am definitely creating art. And my commercial art colleagues believe it to be the best art the world has ever seen. That sounds like an ad headline—or maybe a testimonial?